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ABSTRACT

A person may be able to change others' attitudes toward him by his self-presentations. Female undergraduates (N=137) acting as superiors were assigned to evaluate subordinates in one of eight subordinate self-presentation conditions ranging from extreme self-effacement to extreme self-enhancement. Superiors evaluated the persuasive quality of an essay supposedly written by another less competent and less powerful subject (subordinate). After reading the subordinate's self-evaluation, the superior then read and evaluated a second essay supposedly written by the same subordinate. Results showed that as the difference between the superior's evaluation and the subordinate's self-evaluation increased, the superior conformed more to the subordinate's self-evaluation and increased her derogation of the subordinate's ability to evaluate. Subordinate self-effacement was consistently nonproductive across all conditions. Although extreme self-enhancement produced the most positive evaluation of the second essay, slight self-enhancement was the only self-presentation which consistently produced favorable results, when both conformity and derogation responses were considered. Slight self-enhancement produced the least amount of derogation and created a tendency to increase the favorableness of the subordinate's performance as evaluated by her superior. The results support the self-perpetuating process of self-effacement. (NRB)

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THE POWER OF POSITIVE SELF-REPORTING

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(Abstract)

To what extent are our attitudes of other people affected by their self-presentation? This study was designed to determine the differences between self-effacement and self-enhancement upon the attitude of the person receiving a self-evaluation from another individual. The results support the self-perpetuating process of self-effacement. Once set into motion, self-effacement creates a "perpetual negative feedback loop" which may undergird the development and maintenance of depression. Slight self-enhancement was not only considered a viable method for breaking out of this self-effacing cycle but was also presented as an effective strategy for building a more positive self-image.

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THE POWER OF POSITIVE SELF-REPORTING

Statement of the Problem

The evaluations we receive from others can strongly influence our self-concept (Gergen, 1965). This may be particularly true when the evaluation is made by our superior (Jones and Wortman, 1973; McGuire, 1969). To what extent can we change the attitudes of others through our own self-presentations? Norman Vincent Peale (1954) has long suggested that positive thinking creates a positive self-image. However, very little research has evaluated the validity of this approach to interpersonal relationships. This study was designed to empirically investigate one aspect of this "power of positive thinking" philosophy by focusing on what an individual says about himself to other people.

In order to minimize the attitude change effects of the communicator's power, attractiveness, and competence, this study investigated the effects of a subordinate's self-evaluation on the superior's evaluation of the subordinate. As a result, superiors evaluated subordinates who presented themselves as either self-effacing or self-enhancing. In response to the subordinate's self-evaluation, superiors were given the opportunity to utilize the following mechanisms to reduce the discrepancy between their evaluations and the evaluations received by them from their subordinates: (a) change in attitude by either conforming or reacting to the subordinate's self-evaluation, (b) distorted recall of the subordinate's self-evaluation, (c) distorted recall of the superior's initial evaluation, (d) derogation of the subordinate, (e) rejection

of the superior's own abilities to evaluate, and (f) devaluation of the evaluation process.

Social Judgment Theory (Sherif and Hovland, 1961), Reactance Theory (Brehm, 1966), and the ingratiation literature (Jones & Wortman, 1973) provided the theoretical basis for this study's hypotheses. It was predicted that there would be a negative linear relationship between subordinate self-enhancement and attitude change on the part of the superior. A curvilinear relationship between subordinate self-effacement and the superior's attitude change was also predicted, with slight self-effacement producing the most positive attitude change.

SUBJECTS

The subjects for this study included 137 female college students enrolled in introductory psychology at the University of Kansas. The students were randomly assigned to one of eight subordinate self-presentations (extreme self-enhancement, moderate self-enhancement, slight self-enhancement, agreement, no self-presentation, slight self-effacement, moderate self-effacement, extreme self-effacement), and to one of two essay order conditions.

PROCEDURES

After being introduced to the study, the students took an examination designed to manipulate competency through bogus test results. Once the examination had been supposedly graded, the subjects privately and publicly evaluated the persuasive quality of an essay reportedly written by another experimental subject who was presented as being less competent and as having less power than the actual subject. These procedures were designed to experimentally

create the superior-subordinate paradigm. Throughout this paper the word "superior" will be used in referring to the actual experimental subjects. The supposed essay writer will be referred to as the "subordinate." Following these initial evaluations, the superiors saw the essay writer's own self-evaluation of her essay. These self-evaluations were controlled by the experimenter and varied in relation to the superior's first private evaluation from extremely self-effacing to extremely self-enhancing. These bogus self-evaluations provided the basis for the self-presentation manipulation. The superiors then made private and public evaluations of a second essay which was supposedly written by the same essay writer and which was prejudged to be of equal persuasive quality to the first essay. Finally, the superiors completed a series of questionnaires designed to measure the other dependent variables of concern, to check for the success of the manipulations, and to assess subject suspicion.

RESULTS

The results indicate that the experimental conditions successfully caused the superiors to perceive themselves as more competent than their subordinates in evaluating the essays. The self-presentations were also perceived as intended by the superiors. Ten of the subjects reported being suspicious of the experiment's true purpose. Their responses were therefore not included in the analysis. No essay order effects were noted.

The results indicate that the superiors utilized only three of the six available mechanisms for reducing the discrepancy between their judgments and the judgments of their subordinates. As the

difference between the superior's evaluation and the subordinate's evaluation increased, the superiors conformed more to the subordinate's self-evaluation (Figure 1) and increased their derogation of the subordinate's ability to evaluate. In addition, the superior's evaluating self-effacing subordinates recalled their own initial evaluations in such a way that the discrepancy magnitude was reduced.

Devaluation of the evaluation process, self-rejection of one's own ability to evaluate, and distortion of the subordinate's self-evaluation were not systematically influenced by the self-presentations. In addition, there was no relationship between the superior's liking for the subordinate and the positiveness of the superior's second evaluation.

CONCLUSIONS

Impact of a Subordinate's Self-Presentation

Subordinate self-effacement was consistently non-productive across all conditions. The impact of self-enhancement on the other hand was mixed. Although extreme self-enhancement did produce the most positive evaluation of the second essay, slight self-enhancement was the only self-presentation strategy which consistently produced favorable results, when both the conformity and the derogation responses were considered. Slight self-enhancement not only produced the least amount of derogation; it also created a tendency to increase the favorableness of the subordinate's performance as evaluated by her superior. Extreme as well as moderate self-enhancement may yield an immediate benefit in a higher rating on a particular performance, but the significant derogation might eventually override this benefit, resulting in an overall negative evaluation. These two

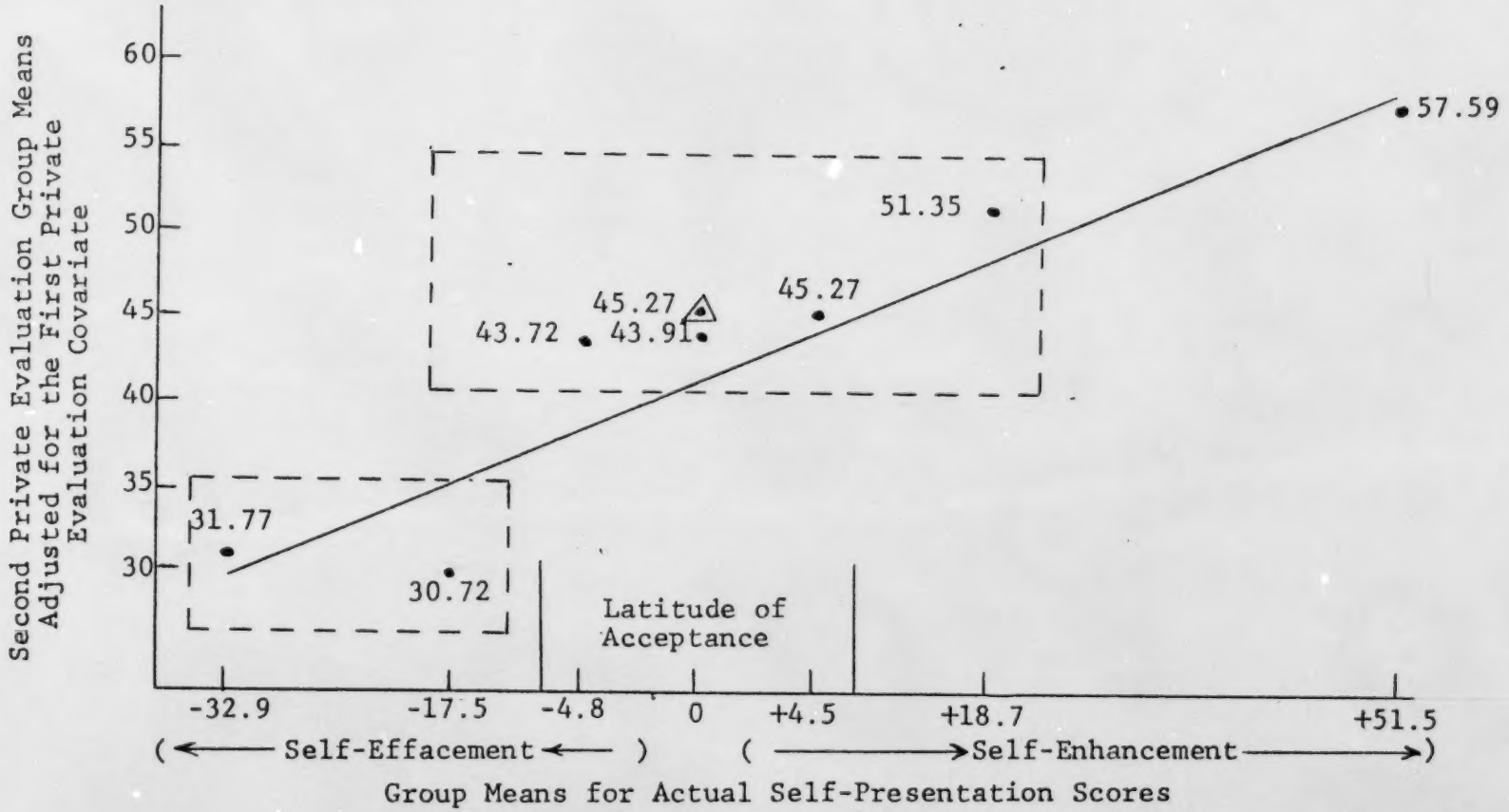

Figure 1. Relationship of the subject's second private evaluation to the group means for the actual self-presentation scores. (The actual self-presentation scores for each subject were computed by subtracting the first private evaluation from the essay writer's evaluation of her first essay. Means located within the same box are not significantly different from each other using a Tukey B at the .05 level. △ represents the adjusted group mean for the no self-presentation control group.)

levels of self-enhancement are therefore not recommended.

It is therefore concluded, that for this particular experimental situation, the most productive self-presentation for a subordinate in relating to one's superior is slight self-enhancement. This conclusion closely corresponds to one of Norman Vincent Peale's rules for building self-confidence: "Make a true estimate of your own ability, then raise it 10%. Do not become egotistical, but develop a wholesome self-respect" (1954, p. 17).

Effects of Self-Effacement

As with self-enhancement, conformity for the subjects in the self-effacement conditions did not represent rejection of one's own ability, devaluation of the experiment, or inaccurate recall of the essay writer's self-presentation. However, derogation of the essay writer was noted among the superiors receiving a self-effacing presentation.

Control of One's Destiny

Development of a perpetual negative feedback loop. The results of this study support the premise that we do control some of the reinforcement contingencies in our environment. This is particularly true for those who persist in "self put-downs." Individuals who overtly derogate themselves set into motion a "perpetual negative feedback loop" which might order itself as follows:

1. Initiator communicates negative self-information.
2. Recipient of the communication conforms to this negative information.
3. Recipient communicates to the initiator a negative opinion of the initiator.
4. Initiator experiences greater self-doubts and communicates self-information which is even more negative than the previous communication.

This series of events could continue indefinitely until the initiator becomes very discouraged and depressed, or until he is able to break out of this perpetual cycle.

How might a counselor facilitate the reversal of this self-defeating pattern in a client? The following methods seem to have some merit:

1. Educate the client so that he becomes more aware of his present response limitations and becomes motivated to broaden his response repertoire (example: assertiveness training).

2. Direct the client to a positively reinforcing environment (example: understanding support group).

3. Educate the client on the process of the perpetual negative feedback loop and encourage him to replace self-effacing communication with slight self-enhancement (example: role playing).

Self-enhancement and self-esteem. In addition to being a worthwhile technique for avoiding or even reversing self-defeating processes, slight self-enhancement may be the first step in moulding a more positive self-concept. Gergen (1965) found that subjects who consciously misrepresented themselves in a favorable direction actually reported an increase in self-esteem after being informed that the recipient of their positively distorted self-presentation believed their misrepresentation. Gergen offers two explanations for this increase in self-esteem. In line with social reinforcement theory, positive feedback when perceived by the recipient as genuine, tends to cause the self-enhancer to believe some of this positively distorted self-evaluation. Second, subjects who are reinforced for attempting to ingratiate become more aware of their positive attributes. Using a similar paradigm, Upshaw and Yates (1968) found support for the hypothesis that the mere experience of successfully managing the attributes of others causes one to more positively view his

social competence and thereby increases his self-esteem. Combining the results of these two studies with the present investigation suggests that there is real "power in positive self-reporting."

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